

Ad Hoc Committee on Best Practices in Northampton Decision Making
Public Forum on the “Meadows Land Plan”
Aug. 25, 2008

The purpose of the forum was to create and record the narrative of a recent community problem solving process in the words of the people involved and to search that narrative for information useful to the Best practice Committee.

Maria Tymoczko-former Ward 3 councilor

Dr. Tymoczko detailed a long history of challenging and poorly resolved issues dating back more than 30 years in the Meadows section of Northampton (about 4000 acres mostly in the Conn. River flood plain) As a resident since 1971 she observed that much ill will was generated by the Fairgrounds, which could draw very large crowds that damaged the neighborhood. She also claimed that the area and most of Ward 3 was held in low esteem and that the city tried to dump its problems there in the form of social service programs and facilities that grew up as the Northampton State Hospital began to deinstitutionalize mentally ill patients. She also listed federal and state regulations that were created with little regard for residents as a continuing sore. Maria marked the beginning of improved conditions when the Fairgrounds agreed to regular open meetings with the neighborhood as part of an agreement worked out with City Council to allow Simulcast betting in 2003. She said that there needs to be a “level playing field” where all neighborhoods are treated equally and with respect. Stakeholder interests need to be acknowledged, people respected and led to feel “safe and heard”. She also stated the community has legitimate interests in the activities of private organizations (e.g. Fair Association, Smith College, non-profits) ; that business decisions can have community impacts and that transparency and openness are an essential part of best practice.

Wayne Feiden- Director, Office of Planning and Development

Wayne agreed that this was the most controversial part of the city but saw the underlying turbulence growing from the “hodgepodge” of regulations imposed on this extraordinarily valuable area to protect it from change. “ A lot of what I’ve been doing my last 20 years has been cleaning up what was created in the 1975 Comprehensive plan He said there was an ongoing battle between groups who saw the meadows as a priceless natural habitat to be left untouched and those living and working there who wanted the same rights as residents in the rest of the city. Wayne implied that the area drifted without a coherent plan for so long because leaders feared controversy and assumed they would pay a stiff political price for any solution. Finally in 2002 under increasing development pressure and supported by Federal financial incentives the city appointed a Flood Hazard Mitigation team to create a plan that would include recommendations for land use in the Meadows and lead to lower flood insurance rates. He said it was important to deal with controversy and that controversy could work for you because it got people’s attention. Rumors always get generated..the challenge is to manage rumors.

Alex Ghiselin-former City Councilor and member of the Flood Hazard Mitigation team Alex said that the team reviewed the record of past floods ,existing plans, and federal flood hazard mitigation literature. A draft report was prepared that reflected professional

input but almost no public outreach. The plan was presented at a public hearing where a loud and angry audience accused the city and the planning department of failing to address the needs of people living in and near the Meadows. The depth of feeling shocked many and seemed to confirm predictions that the issues were too hot to handle. This plan, stripped of land use and zoning recommendations, was accepted by Council in 2003. But as both Wayne and Gerry Budger said the “problems didn’t go away”.

Gerald Budger..chair of the Meadows Coalition; now chair of the Ward 3 Neighborhood Assoc.

Gerry said the Flood Mitigation hearing was the nastiest most contentious meeting he had ever attended. He came away convinced that the neighborhood needed an organization where residents could share information and work on common problems. He had been a member of the Simulcast committee that brokered the deal that led to regular meetings between the Fairgrounds and neighbors. Both Maria and he agree that this two way flow of information dramatically changed the relationship. Longstanding hostility was replaced by cooperation and transparency. Gerry went on to establish the (The Meadows Coalition) mostly aimed at preservation and at the same time worked to enlarge the idea of community problem solving. He emphasized that, “What made this work is we asked people what they thought we should do at the beginning of the process”.

Marilyn Richards, Ward 3 Councilor 2004 to 08

Bob Reckman President of the Ward 3 Neighborhood Assoc, Ward 3 Councilor in 2008

Soon after she was elected, Marilyn was asked by Wayne to restart work on the land use Plan for the Meadows which had stalled after the angry response to the Flood Mitigation Plan. Marilyn, Gerry and Bob Reckman had started to build the Ward 3 Neighborhood Association with Bob as its first President and hosting public meetings on the future of the Meadows became the Associations first project. They decided to hold a series public meetings that would target different stakeholders. The farmers, the business owners, the residents, environmentalists. They held the meetings in the neighborhood (a Barn, the airport)

Bob and Marilyn both said it was important to make clear to people at the beginning that there was no existing plan, and they would not start on a plan until they had listened to everybody. The city’s Senior Planner Carolyn Misch transcribed ideas on large pads so the process was transparent and could be modified right away. Bob said a flyer was distributed to every household in the Ward. That there was good newspaper coverage and at least 350 people took part at one meeting or another. He said the first 5 meetings took place over six weeks “bang, bang, bang” that it was important to keep it moving. With Caroline’s help they compiled a detailed report which they took back to a general meeting where it was corrected and a consensus formed. A process that was repeated at still another public meeting. He said the land use plan that resulted was a consensus document because it came from the ground up . He and Marilyn both emphasized the crucial help from the city in the person of Carolyn Misch who brought organizational

and planning skills that were central to the success of the project. Marilyn said she wished she had involved some constituencies (e.g. city, chamber,) earlier.

Carolyn Misch-Senior Planner for the city

She said she entered the process with some “trepidation” because what she called “misinformation” and rumors about the city’s intentions. She said the pending sale of the airport added to peoples concerns. She agreed that once started the process was very productive. She said “the important part was passing information in both directions and then people began to understand each other”. She credited the strong community connection provided by Marilyn, Bob, Gerry and the Ward 3 Neighborhood Association with getting people to participate which she said was always a challenge. She said that targeting different stake holders helped clarify the issues. That people who attended could hear that they mostly shared the same concerns “they wanted things to stay the same” and that they came to understand “that city rules and regulations could help them get there. She characterized the process as “basic planning exercise” done in partnership with Ward 3 not much different from others done in other parts of the city.

Bruce Hart –environmentalist/officer of the Broad Brook Coalition

While he “respected the process” he was critical of the outcome. He said the Meadows Coalition was very small and maybe influenced by the Ward 3 Association “an inappropriate blending of political and business interests” in the group supposed to be representing environmental interests. His harshest criticism was for changes made to the plan at the end to allow existing businesses to expand beyond what had originally been proposed and widely agreed upon. He said wildlife and habitat were not winners in this process.

Bob Bacon..owner of the Airport (spoke at Best Practices on 9/3)

He thought the process very good. He said that at the focus group for business, expansion was a major topic and that it was agreed that existing businesses would be allowed to build out to 5% of their land area. He said it was a shock to see a 1% limit in the final draft and felt that it was more a transcribing error which was fixed rather than a rewriting of the agreement. Both Caroline and Marilyn seemed to agree more or less but also agreed that it was a real glitch from which a lesson should be learned.

Lessons learned-

1. How and when to bring the public in to decision making is crucial. Bob, Marilyn and Gerry all said in this case it was important to start with a blank slate. Recording all the comments and opinions and then returning to make sure they had “gotten it right” before starting to work on a plan defused the historical anger and produced a near consensus
2. Although the city provided critical help it was (and was seen as) a community driven process.

3. Focusing on one stakeholder group at a time fostered a real conversation where information “was passed back and forth”. The importance of this TWO WAY FLOW was repeated by almost everyone who agreed that it was central to correcting misinformation and building collaboration.
4. The process went quickly (five meetings in six weeks) with good press coverage attracting more than enough people to make the process legitimate in the eyes of the community (with the possible exception of environmentalists)
5. Helping the community solve its own problems empowers people. It builds confidence and experience and pays a continuing dividend. The Simulcast committee led to a neighborhood Fairground Committee which led to The Meadows Coalition and the Ward 3 Association and arguably the most politically and civically active area in the city.
6. If neighborhood gets a reputation for being angry there may be a good reason and postponing action is not a solution.
7. Self interest needs to be acknowledged and articulated so that realistic conversation and compromise can begin. The Meadows process was successful to the extent that it brokered the changes necessary to preserve those qualities the city of Northampton says it values.
8. Using established neighborhood/community organizations to “get the word out” helps increase participation from the community as a whole.
9. Note. Planning process doesn’t necessarily work for all decision making needs at the city level.